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Brasilia as Utopia: Territorializing the Center

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From Plato to Aldous Huxley, from Rabelais to Herbert Geòrge Wells, many took the mission of giving shape to an old human tendency: the dissatisfaction with things the way they are. This tendency leads to the idealization of better men, places and societies. On the one hand, we have the fantasy and the dream; on the other hand, the constant search for the concretization of this imaginary.

As we know, the generic term — Utopia —, in the work of its creator, the humanist Thomas Moore, is a proper name which designates an imaginary country described by the author. In 1532, Rabelais also uses this term with the same meaning. But the word, which etymologically means “no where” (“a non-existent place”), has acquired different connotations throughout various usages..

Raymond Trousson, in creating a literary history of the utopic thinking in *Voyage aux Pays de Nulle Part*, 1979, retraces the various meanings of the notion of “utopia” exhaustively, in search of a definition that could contemplate them all. To develop his considerations, he adopts a functional definition to utopia as a literary genre. He says: “we talk of utopia when, in a narrative (which excludes the political texts) we find the description of a community (which excludes Robison Crusoe’s adventure) based upon some political, economic and moral principles, restoring the complexity of social existence (which excludes the golden Age and the Arcadia); it is also presented as an aim to be reached (constructive utopia) or as a forecast of a hell (the modern anti-utopia), settled upon a real or an imaginary space, or even in time; finally, it should be described at the end of some journey, imaginary or not, plausible or not”¹.

Trousson’s considerations, although referring to the utopic literary narratives, also lead my reflexions upon this theme. Taking a central fragment of his definition: “utopia as an ideal to be reached”, I also borrow Trousson’s notion of “real space” to talk about Brasília, the capital of Brazil, as a utopic project, the desire to territorialize the center.

We don’t mean a literary utopia, but an “Utopia of State”, that is, the one that made the Brazilian government, in 1957, create a real city able to concentrate

the ideals of a new and different Brazil. Above all, a planned space, in harmony with the political project of development of a country on its way to industrialization. In fact, Brasília is a utopic experience of modern urbanism, conceived to offer new forms of conviviality; a functional city, planned without concerning its future inhabitants. In parallel, Brasília meant the decentralization, the relocation of the political power, once concentrated in Rio de Janeiro, and, at the same time, the possibility to fulfill the emptiness of the wild and half deserted territory of the Mid-Western region, the Planalto Central, the place where progress soon will arrive. In sum, Brasília was the most challenging modernist project, which came out as the most palpable example of urban utopia.

That is how the anthropologist James Holston understood it, in his book *The Modernist City — An Anthropological Critique of Brasília* (1989)². He studies how the project of Brasília fusions utopia and history. Considering the city project as “an example of a modern process of national construction and of modernism”, Holston also examines “how the construction of this future subverts in practice its utopic premises” (p. 3) For him, Brasília is “an example of modernist architectural principles and urban planning” (p. 12). Such principles, he states, “constitute a radical reconceptualization of city life”, certainly referring to the inexistence of “corners”, public squares and other sites that constitute points of reference in the vast majority of cities, where people meet or circulate. It also alludes to the planning that concentrates the housing and alimentation in “blocks”, that is, the houses and the leisure. Blocks, that are known as “super-quadrads”, repeat themselves in a perfectly identical way and do not inter-communicate, as if each one had its own autonomous life, isolated one from each other.

The configuration of the new city influences directly on the habits and the daily life of its inhabitants. They change according to a previous programme: they don’t remain still, but circulate. In such a configuration, it is not possible go places on foot or to cover long distances walking; so motorcars and buses become a must.

The construction of Brasília was an old idea in the late fifties. Many previous governments to Juscelino Kubitschek’s thought in transferring the political power in to somewhere within the Brazilian territory away from the coast, where the strategically determined localization of the capital would generate progress. Although, it was presidente Kubitschek that took over the project, which had been a part of his political campaign. To build Brasília was his “meta-synthesis”, the most important aim of his Programme created to develop the country and to be performed during the period of his government, from 1956 to 1961. “Integration by interiorization” was the slogan used by Juscelino to mobilize the public opinion towards the idea of constructing Brasília, what meant to recuperate a substantive part of the country and to integrate it to the economy of the other parts of Brazil. In

the same manner, Brasília should not be an isolated project, but an idea that should be repeated in the future, creating other poles of national recuperation connected to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, that is, to the South-Eastern region.

In spite of all the propaganda to spread out and consolidate the idea, many and strong objections occurred when, in 1956, Juscelino said that the new capital would be built to be inaugurated on April 21, 1960, and that its foundation would be celebrated with the performance of a First Mass to be held on May 3rd, 1957. The choice of the date to inaugurate the new capital and of the type of religious ceremony to celebrate its foundation (reproducing the First Mass of Pedro Álvares Cabral on May 3rd 1500) were not without purpose. On the contrary, they linked the foundation and inauguration of Brasília to the discovery of Brazil, associating the construction of the city to the notion of rediscovery of the country. In this way, that utopic project found in the History of Brazil its frame of references and pointed symbolically to a new beginning. The imaginary of the New World would exert among Brazilians the same fascination that it had done among Europeans centuries before. It should recuperate the notion of “locus amoenus,” of a peaceful and easy life, of equality and freedom caused by the discovery of America in the European imagination of the XVIth century. Indeed, it happened. Brasília, or better than that, the idea of Brasília gained life in the popular imagination, meaning sometimes the possibility of a new life, of a new starting over. It also meant freedom, ample space and an endless horizon, opposing the void of the “cerrado” to the overpopulated cities of the coast, their social problems and excessive violence. Therefore, Brasília represented the notion of Utopia, an ideal place where one would love to settle one’s expectations of a new life.

In Brazilian literature, the poet Manuel Bandeira had created in the thirties, a specific designation to such a place: he called it *Pasárgada*. In the late fifties, Brasília becomes the materialization of *Pasárgada*. Carlos Drummond de Andrade, another great Brazilian poet, will see the city under the same perspective. An example of this is his poem entitled “Destino: Brasília” (Destiny: Brasília), October 21th, 1956, included in *Versiprosa*³.

The limits of this essay don’t allow me to quote the complete poem, but the reproduction of some verses is important. The poem starts like this:

I’m heading to Brasília	(Vou no rumo de Brasília,
Here is not my place	(Não é aqui o meu lugar.
Freedom, when banned,	(A liberdade, no exílio,
Starts to die.	(Já começa a definhar.)

There is a clear intertextual play between this poem and Manuel Bandeira’s text mentioned above. They are not only structurally parallel in their formal construction and of reproducing many similar poetical procedures but they concentrate

an utopic idea. Manuel Bandeira's poem also starts with "I'm going away to Pasárgada". The notion of escaping from quotidian reality is a dominant one in both texts, as a result of the spacial displacement then desired. The idealized place to where some selected friends are also taken, concentrates all facilities: freedom to act, to think, to wish as one wishes to be, without any of the impositions or restrictions imposed by civilization. The changing, for this same reason, implies the alteration of the landscape: "I'm heading to Brasília / far away from the sea/ the jungle is where I live/ so easy to live in". In these lines the poet synthetises the changing in the scenery and opposes civilization against barbarity, face to face, in inverted positions, when he states that it has become easier to live "in the jungle" than in city. Everything shall be more functional, simpler and easier in Brasília. Living facilities are associated in the poem to the absence of the laws and obligations that overload daily life. The poem, then, explicitly concentrates the utopian characteristic of the project.

The chosen spot to the construction of Brasília was wild, supposedly inhabited by the native tribes of the "tupinambás"; that is why in the poem, the poor vegetation of the "cerrado", typical of the central Highlands (Planalto Central) becomes a "jungle". All is reassured and made clearer in "I'm heading to Brasília / since Rio is hard to bear".

Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem enhances the effects provoked by the idea of Brasília in the popular imagination: evasion, transformation, facilities, the quest of the new, the quest of other centres. Decentralization is fundamental in this context and allows the enlargement of the territory. As new discoverers - "bandeirantes" and pioneers - the builders of Brasília would extend the limits of the national territory. Brazil would enlarge his frontiers both geographically and economically. It would, therefore, become a new country. Brasília: a new Brazil.

The project proved to have, then, two essential elements: the expansion of the territory would correspond to the increase of the industrial productivity (the country, if augmented from the center would be a powerful nation), besides the fact that everything there would be functional and modern, in time with the new era.

Concepts such as "new", "greatest", "more dynamic", "best articulated", "modern" were predominant on the basis of this developmental project to which Drummond's poem represent a meaningful symbolical support. The poem ends up with one incisive and brief verse: "I'm heading for Brasília".

The city is a new "Pasárgada", a utopian place. If Bandeira's ideal imagined space was in its essence a place of escape and evasion in 1930, Drummond's Brasília, on the other hand, based on a state project of 1956, has a different colour from the former one. Firstly, in being an "escape" it refers explicitly where it wants to escape from ("do Rio de Janeiro" - "from Rio de Janeiro"). Brasília, therefore, is directly

opposed to a given place (the place of the political power). Moreover, in *Bandeira*, the evasion from everything (and from all real places) in search for a better life does not involve a political project, represented by Brasília, as the poem by Drummond does. That is the reason why in the latter poem there is a well defined direction, a concrete place where to go: to leave behind the chaotic environment and head for Brasília, the new order, supposed urbane and civilized.

Indeed Brasília meant a project of social reformation: if the existant and conventional cities exposed the social differences, the new city proposed an equalitarian organization in which discrepancies would be neutralized by architecture. The buildings would look equal, the commercial spaces would be similar, and the "super-quadrads" (super-blocks) would follow the same and unique pattern, repeated on the planning of the city. Both Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, the architects responsible for the planning and for the urban architecture of Brasília, followed Le Corbusier principles, especially the principle of "geometry", whose original inspiration comes from Haussmann. In the remodelling of Paris, Haussmann had already applied two basic principles: the use of a geometrical order for the city plan and the outline of wide avenues linking the peripheral areas to the city center. According to Niemeyer, "social architecture" should attempt at "solving collective problems" that is to say the new architectural dispositions, of a functional nature, would provoke transformations in collective life. There would be radical changes in the systems of dwelling, traffic, working, and even leisure, due to the redefinition of urban functions. Brasília has been the materialization of Lucio Costa's and Oscar Niemeyer's utopian ideas.

The new city emerged as an actualization of the utopia in the desert: the future dream came true in the present. Besides, it also represents the recuperation of the past as far as it objectifies Dom Bosco's (the patron saint of the city) dream, who had foreseen the upsurging of a lake in the place, as well as its future importance as a center of decisions in the country.

Nevertheless at the end and consequent occupation, reality proved to be diverse from what had been previously planned. No doubt, however, we can affirm that some essential objectives of the project have been achieved: the political center of the country was moved, the desert became an oasis, the country enlarged its territory and its range of repercussion abroad (especially in the field of architecture and urbanism). The process of national integration, then, was legitimized through universal recognition.

On a par with these facts, utopia revealed its hidden face, the one of the distance between the imagined and this imaginary, when experienced.

Most of the ones who migrated to Brasília, as if it were a new Eldorado, began to show some insteadiness.

If the project aimed at redrawing the existant patterns and create a different conception, modern and modernist, the latter one provoked a series of changes of the habits originated in the most conventional cities, where the street, just to mention one, is a meeting point and a place of exchanging experiences. The absence of corners and squares started to show the non-humane face of Brasília: it eliminated the “flâneur”, a central element in studies such as W. Benjamin’s “Paris - the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, in *Charles Baudelaire” A lyric in the era of high capitalism* (1973)⁴. Many said that the city led its inhabitants to anonymity much more than to equality. The search for the difference starts to be manifested: some chose to live on the artificial lake, in beautiful mansions of various styles. The heterogeneity of styles soon manifested the wish of social and economic distinction and individuality.

The original project of building a club for leisure next to each “super-quadra” hasn’t been materialized. Instead, distinct private clubs have been built, of which difference is marked by the social and economical status of their members. Many of those who built Brasília remained there; without any participation in the government they had no right to the official apartments of the “super-quadras” and then they had to settle down in the outskirts, originating the so called “satellite-cities” (“cidades satélites”), that means, in other words, to be excluded from integral experience of the city. On the other hand, even though it didn’t reproduce the characteristic features of a conventional city, Brasília started out to recreate certain patterns not programmed in the original planning and to configure a multiple result: The former project was maintained, but the new inhabitants (the ones who came after the inauguration) brought in their own characteristics from different places, imposing, sometimes, changes into the original project. All this happened due to the fact that the utopic project had been built over the negation of the pre-existant reality (Brasília would be, in a urbanistic and architectural sense, the anti-Brazil, therefore, a postcolonial project), After the reproduction of certain previous characteristics, this negation of the pre-existant becomes unsteady with the mingling of traces from the old system with the features of the new plan. As a post-colonial project, Brasília was a de-historicized city, with no links with the colonial history of the country. Both the inhabitants and the government itself settled down another dimension and re-historicized the city.

A contradiction concerned with this question is born, as James Holston observes: “This contradiction is inevitable in the utopic projects since any attempt to use the established order destroys the utopic difference which is the premisses of the project itself”⁵.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s poem has been used to illustrate the motivation and the reception of the idea of building Brasília as a utopia; also, James

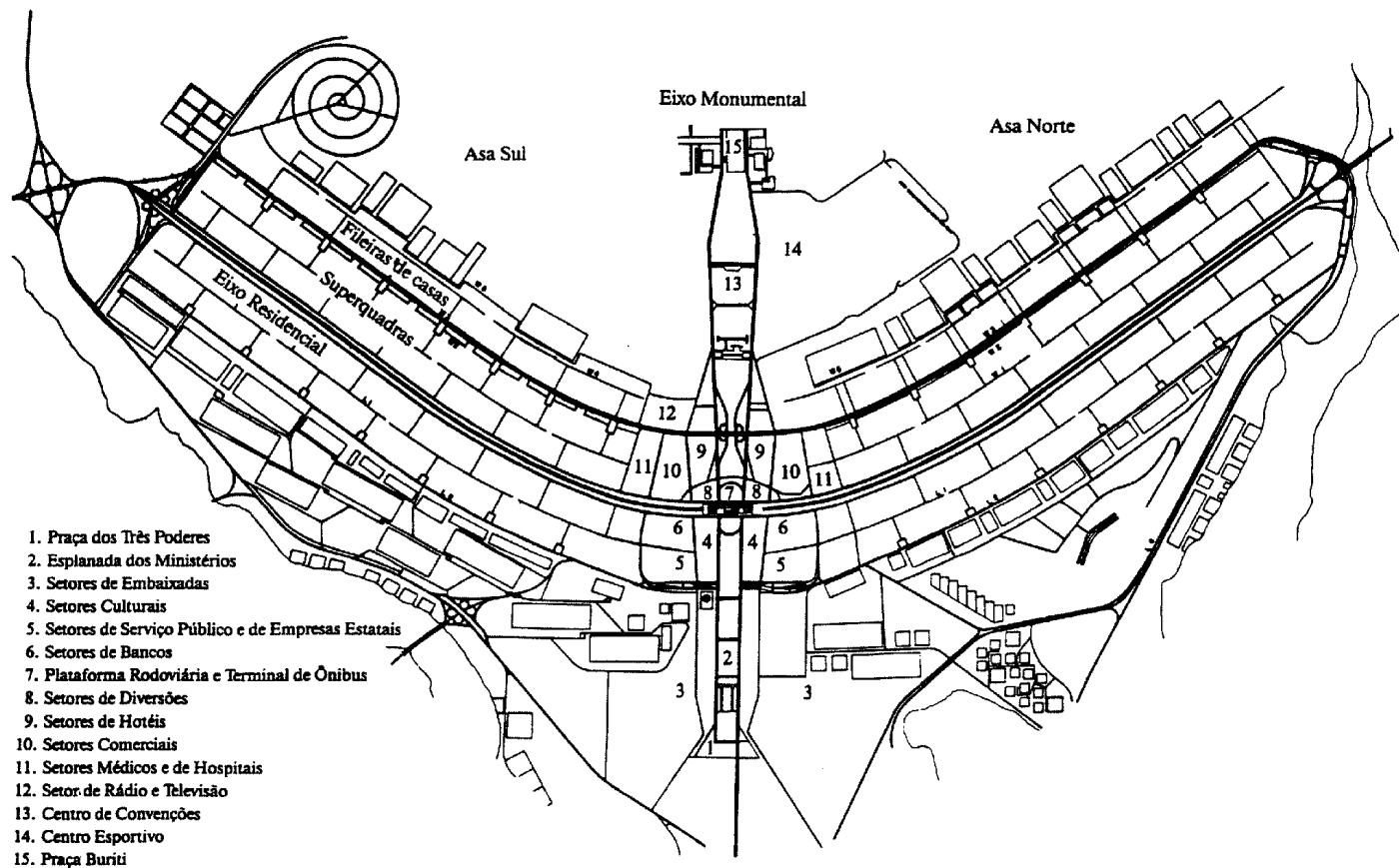
Holston's book has been mentioned, among the extensive bibliography available, as the most complete example of ethnographic and anthropological investigation that accounts for the results of this project and for its development as the interaction of utopian and distopic elements. The conclusions of this text point out to the fact that "the study of Brasília demonstrates that these utopian paradoxes co-exist and reinforce each other"⁶. It means they become complementary, demanding, in this manner, to be studied from the perspective of the tensions they create, "as constitutive elements of a critical perspective of the modern world". This modern world was poetically drawn also by Drummond de Andrade in "Favelário" where the poet explores the contradictions: "Confronto. A suntuosa Brasília, a esquelética Ceilândia / Contemplam-se. Qual delas falará? primeiro? Que tem a dizer ou a esconder/ uma em face da outra? (...) E pensam-se, remiram-se em silêncio/ as gêmeas criações do gênio brasileiro."⁷ Here he explores the contradiction, establishing the confrontation between Brasília and a very poor Brazilian city, Ceilândia.

Such considerations lead us to think of essential questions, that is, what are the existent possibilities for the artistic and intellectual production that desires to express a better and different world and points out at a near future? Shall we maintain our desire of the future? Up to what point does utopia support these projects as a must for the idealization of a better world?

All this leads to James Holston's conclusion that "without a utopian element, plans remain imprisoned behind the bars of existent conditions"⁸ In fact, men cannot live without utopia, it is their way of resisting the absence of dream in the daily life.

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Mapa 5.2 Organização setorial e plano de tráfego do Plano Piloto, 1980.

Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

VOU-ME EMBORA PRA PASÁRGADA

Vou-me embora pra Pasárgada
Lá sou amigo do rei
Lá tenho a mulher que eu quero
Na cama que escolherei
Vou-me embora pra Pasárgada
Vou-me embora pra Pasárgada
Aqui eu não sou feliz
Lá a existência é uma aventura
De tal modo inconsequente
Que Joana a Louca de Espanha
Rainha e falsa demente
Vem a ser contraparente
Da nora que nunca tive
E como farei ginástica
Andarei de bicicleta
Montarei em burro brabo
Subirei no pau-de-sebo
Tomarei banhos de mar!
E quando estiver cansado
Deito na beira do rio
Mando chamar a mãe-d'água

Pra me contar as histórias
Que no tempo de eu menino
Rosa vinha me contar
Vou-me embora pra Pasárgada
Em Pasárgada tem tudo
É outra civilização
Tem um processo seguro
De impedir a concepção
Tem telefone automático
Tem alcalóide à vontade
Tem prostitutas bonitas
Para gente namorar
E quando eu estiver mais triste
Mas triste de não ter jeito
Quando de noite me der
Vontade de me matar
— Lá sou amigo do rei —
Terei a mulher que eu quero
Na cama que escolherei
Vou-me embora pra Pasárgada

DESTINO: BRASÍLIA

Vou no rumo de Brasília, não é aqui meu lugar.
A liberdade, no exílio, já começa a definhar.

Já não posso ouvir meu rádio dizer as coisas comuns.
Lá fundarei uma arcádia e comerei jerimuns.

Lá não chegam portarias do titular da Viação.
Lá correm livres os rios e livre é meu coração.

Sobe o imposto de consumo?
Ônibus mais caro, trem?
Lá, sem condução alguma, sento no chão com meu bem.

Vou no rumo de Brasília, para bem longe do mar.
A selva é meu domicílio, tão mais fácil de habitar.

Adeus, fumaça, adeus, fila, adeus, carro matador.
Prefiro orquestra de grilo ao silêncio do censor.

Se a lei contra a imprensa pega, jornal vira boletim metereológico, cego, surdo, mudo, chocho enfim.

Escola? a da natureza.
Prato do dia? arganaz.
Vou redescobrir, surpreso, no mato, a prístina paz.

Vou no rumo de Brasília que o Rio está de amargar.
Da inquisição o concílio me proíbe até pensar.

Ladinos do bairro Fátima, Inocentes do Leblon, que resta — digei, num átimo — salvo Glorinha Drummond?

Se o governo vai malito e pensa que vai melhor, quem mais lhe desmancha a fita de pobre vestida a Dior?

Se chamo alguém de plagiário (provando-o) me salta a lei: Direto à Penitenciária, por injúria grave! Eu sei.

Vou no rumo de Brasília, o Catete vai ficar.
Se ele for eu rogo auxílio a Exu, monarca do ar.

Em Brasília ninguém tenta espalhar promessa vã.
Transporte? ao tapa do vento, monto na besta alazã.

É seu maior privilégio a vida sem pose, ao sol, a simplicidade egrégia da selva como lençol...

Orquídea, lontra cachoeiro em sussuro musical.
Não há, nem de bridadeira, Polícia Municipal.

Vou no rumo de Brasília, e para me deliciar, levo meu compadre Emílio Moura, de brando falar,

Cyro, Cruls, Gilberto Amado, Anibal, mago sutil, Rodrigo M.F., apurada essência do meu Brasil.

Não são fantasias bobas: Portinari e seu pincel; em vez de Orfeu, Vila-Lobos.
Bandeira — of course —: Manuel.

E amigos, amigas, certa saudade do que era azul, pois mesmo longe está perto meu norte — da Zona Sul.

Vou no rumo de Brasília.

Drummond, 21-10-56.

P.S. Brasília foi inaugurada em 1960.